

in the mess of it all

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by [flowersferns](#)

Summary

This... this was becoming dangerous. It was right there in front of him, encapsulated in that one single word. The need of it. Their terrible symbiosis.

They were sewn together by breakable thread. Surgeon's sutures, harsh knots over bloody wounds, not made to last, just willing to hold them together long enough to keep their blood in. They'd learned to avoid sharp objects, their conversations carefully side-stepping the knife-edges of words that threatened to sever each stitch.

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When a routine mission goes haywire, Soap and Ghost are left stranded deep in the mountains of Eastern Europe. Left alone, injured and reeling with the aftermath, honesty seems come to the surface between them a lot more easily than usual.

Notes

adds a stomach-turning amount of implicit understanding, mutual connection and shared dread to your manly military men
is this good?? is this what you wanted???

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Soap leaned back in his seat in the heli and sent a silent thank-you to Price for pushing their familiar team assignment.

Over the past few months, Soap had noticed that his assignments within the 141 had slowly changed from sporadic solos and random team pairings to the same solid fact, every time.

Where Soap went, Ghost did too.

It made sense — Soap was at his best when he trusted the people he worked with and Ghost had offered him the most solid, tangible loyalty he could have ever imagined. It was no wonder then, as they started to amalgamate in the eyes of the task force, that the Ghost-and-Soap entity became Simon-and-Johnny away from prying eyes, and that comfortable silence and casual touches had bled into something more, *something more, something more*.

It was a relationship that suited Soap. He sometimes felt like a dog that had been tagged at a shelter, bedded in a double crate with the only other living thing that understood him, with the explicit instruction that they were *Not To Be Separated*.

Simon didn't exist when they were on missions.

Soap took a devilish sort of pride in that fact, watching as the man he had come to know disappeared into a haze of smoke and silence, replaced by the vestiges of an empty vessel given shape behind his mask.

It was *Ghost* that paced the length of the helicopter as infil approached, eyes hidden in hollow sockets as he spoke to their team of marines. Bathed in the red light of the bay, he became something inhuman, an unreachable, impenetrable facade.

“Right,” he said. “We’ve done it a thousand times before. We have an unconfirmed number of hostiles, so when we hit the ground, I want your eyes open. Intel is our priority. Keep pushing forward.”

His voice was gravelled as he moved through the heli, the adrenaline that no doubt flowed through him — as it did through them all— adding a low, muted *wildness* to his tone. It was exhilarating to hear, to feel the energy that radiated from him and permeated the cabin.

A flash of the whites of Ghost's eyes were visible and the golden

brown of them caught on Soap's gaze, lingering there as he moved. Something in Soap's stomach shifted.

He's mine, his heart sang. *He was supposed to be nobody's, and I made him mine.*

Ghost brushed past him, close enough that he could have reached out and touched him. He could have grabbed his arm, forced him to turn, to face him fully. Soap envisioned his version of Ghost, Simon— his face, real and alive, locked away behind his layers of protection.

I have this. I know you. You're mine.

"We're in and out," Ghost continued, catching a ceiling strap at the edge of the loading ramp as their descent began. "Keep your wits about you."

Soap was out of his seat and beside him in seconds. Ghost's eyes locked onto his again and Soap nodded at him, hoping the mass of unspoken words that knotted themselves together in his chest were visible on his face.

For one brief moment, Ghost's hand touched the back of his elbow. It was an imperceptible movement, concealed from the rest of the cabin by the dim haze of red light, but it jerked Soap forcefully into gear. The reality of the space of time ahead of them hit him in one solid wave, just as the wheels of the heli hit the ground with a crash. The ramp of the loading bay descended and revealed a world of howling wind and gunfire.

Ghost looked back at their team one final time, then hit the ground running. Soap joined him, finger on his trigger, his heart squeezing in his chest. *Stay alive*, it begged. *God, please stay alive.*

The sounds of battle were a piercing shriek in his ears, and Soap pushed forward.

—

The fight on the ground was easy.

Too easy.

They cleared two-thirds of the compound in under ten minutes, an achievement Soap would typically celebrate, if it weren't for the fact that they were armed to the teeth with six marines in tow. This wasn't

what their intel had predicted.

Even so, they had yet to recover what they came for, so the team closed in on the final building. The warehouse loomed, grey and obstinate in front of them, shuttered windows like half-lidded eyes scrutinising their approach. With a wave of Soap's hand, the marines fanned out around the building and waited, tension tugging the air around them.

Ghost took point, bracing himself against the side of the door with one shoulder and looking over the other.

Soap gave him a nod and Ghost entered, swallowed by the dark maw of the doorway. Soap followed, gesturing the marines in after them. His heart hammered in his chest, the anticipation eating him alive.

There was supposed to be valuable intel hidden on a flash drive somewhere in the building. Information that could save lives. Retrieving it should have been a routine thing— he'd done it plenty of times before. But between the darkness of the hallway, the silence of the compound and their ridiculous over-preparation, something seemed off to Soap.

Ghost slowed at the next corner and Soap braced himself as he rounded it, but there was no gunfire.

"Clear," came a low grumble over the comms, a sound that sent a tingling up Soap's spine.

"Whole fuckin' place is clear," Soap returned. "Seems fishy, aye, Lt.?"

Ghost opened a door to the right of the next hallway. In the dim lighting, he seemed to disappear entirely for a moment.

Soap tried to ignore how his gut churned in alarm at the thought of Ghost slinking into the shadows and not returning.

There was a beat as Ghost searched the room. "Right you are, Soap. Something's up here."

He re-emerged and faced them. "We'll sweep the building. Take it slow and keep an eye out for anything strange. Use your comms. Sergeant and I will take the first floor."

Childishly, Soap felt his chest warm at being chosen. He nudged the man with his elbow, a gesture he was sure he'd get an earful for when

the time came, and headed up the stairs.

As they climbed the stairs unease began to writhe in Soap's stomach. The sky was growing steadily more overcast outside and the building stayed empty, creating an eerie atmosphere that lingered on his skin. Soap trusted his instinct, perhaps more than he ought to, and in that moment, alarm raised the hairs on the nape of his neck.

Something is wrong, his entire being warned. *Something is terribly wrong.*

Ghost caught his eye. "All good?"

Soap hesitated. "Aye, yeah. All good."

He wished Ghost wasn't so goddamn unreadable. For a long moment, they just looked at each other, caught halfway between floors. Soap felt himself grow restless under scrutiny, so he tipped his head upstairs. Ghost's eyes flicked the length of him, then in one fluid motion he turned and breached the first floor.

A long, empty hallway greeted them at the top of the stairs, stretching into the darkness. Ahead of him, Ghost slowed into a half-crouch, one hand stretched behind him to halt Soap. In the silence, Soap could hear his blood rushing in his ears, and he swore he could hear Ghost's faint breathing beneath his mask. It was a lifeline he clung to in the anxiety of the moment, just one more reminder that the man in front of him was real and human beneath it all. It was a concept as terrifying as it was comforting. Ghost was alive, and breathing, and that made him just as vulnerable as the rest of them.

Soap swallowed around tightness in his throat.

They moved upward, falling into an easy, practiced rhythm. The familiarity of it ached a little—the way Soap knew the boundaries of Ghost's periphery that would leave him exposed, the way Ghost skirted left when Soap leaned right. It was so instinctual, beyond words, barely above breathing.

They began their search.

The first room was a dud, with a broken-in door and filled with nothing but discarded furniture and a thick carpet of dust. Unwilling to linger anywhere for too long, Ghost ushered him out of the room with a firm nod.

The feeling of unease that was gnawing Soap's stomach started to

spread.

The second door was far down the hall, angled just right to catch the thin slants of light that filtered through the blinds of the window by the stairs. Soap was grateful for the small reminder of the world outside, even if all that waited for them was a barren, freezing courtyard in a frost-grey valley.

Ghost waved him into the room and covered him, hovering by the doorframe. Soap could feel the restless energy coming from him. When Ghost got wary he got tense, like a cornered animal. It could be terrifying— Soap had seen him pushed to the limit before; he knew the changes that came over him in those moments where contained energy broke free into action, movement, *consequences*. But in this moment, it was also a powerfully reassuring feeling to know Ghost was there, in Soap's corner, watching for him.

The dust was somehow thicker inside the room, blanketing the office furniture in a powdery, dead snow.

Soap traced a line though the coating on the top of a filing cabinet with his finger and thick wad of dust pulled away, clinging to his skin. He turned to Ghost, hand held up.

“Look at this— no one's been here in years, mate. Ye think our intel was bust?”

Ghost's eyes were unimpressed beneath his helmet, more so when Soap reached over with his dust-coated finger and swiped a grey streak down the strap of his plate carrier.

“Chrissakes, Johnny,” Ghost grunted. “Search.”

Soap raised his eyebrows, but let Ghost's leaden gaze push him to the desk at the far end of the room. He wrenched the uppermost drawer open.

He craned his head back at the Lieutenant as he did so, glee bubbling in his chest. “Och, if only ye-“

Whatever stupid dig he was going to make at Ghost's expense evaporated on his tongue, because in the next moment a single shot rang out through the building and a bullet buried itself in the wall to the left of Soap's head.

“Fuck.”

A single, vehement bark tore itself free from Ghost's throat and then he was moving, pulling Soap away from the desk and behind the doorframe, close against his chest.

"The window."

Sure enough, if Soap followed the bullet's pathway out beyond the door to the far corner of the hall, he could see those same shafts of light as they flickered in through the blinds.

It hadn't occurred to him that there might not only be a window beyond them.

There was a brief moment of stillness. Soap felt the tickle of Ghost's exhale against the hairs at the nape of his neck.

Then the shots came thick and fast, chewing through the doorframe and the plaster of the walls.

The comms crackled to life suddenly in Soap's ear, but the voices that followed static were muffled by the ringing in his head.

"Bravo 0-7, status?"

"Steady." It was Ghost, in his left ear on the comms and in his right ear behind him, pressed close with the tight grip he still had on the back of Soap's tac vest.

"We need to move. Got company and we're sitting fucking ducks in here."

"That's not all." The voice on the comms was too pitchy.

Something is terribly, terribly wrong.

"The place is rigged."

Ghost cursed again, low and insidious.

"Out," he barked into the comms. "Everybody out, *now*."

Ice crept down Soap's spine, but he didn't have time to linger on his fear. There was a split-second break in the gunfire and he seized the opportunity, rounding the doorframe to give as good as he was getting. He got barely two seconds of fire in before Ghost was at his shoulder again, urging him forward.

“Forget it, Johnny, go!”

He hurled the words out and Soap did as he was told, stumbling down the hallway through billowing clouds of dust. It choked him, stinging his eyes and coating the inside of his nose and throat. Blindly, he fumbled for the wall, searching for the staircase. The last thing he needed in that moment was to accidentally fling himself down two flights of stairs, so he braced one hand against the wall and felt for the corner, the banister, anything that could tell him where to go.

His hand slid across rough plaster, catching on a bullet-gouged socket then, *finally*, on the corner of the wall.

He plunged down the stairs, coughing his guts out until he made contact with the wall of the landing. In the brief respite from the dust and gunfire, he scoped out the ground floor, heaving air into his lungs.

Below him, Soap caught sight of two marines, ducking low to avoid the crumbling plaster that rained from above, booking for their exit point. He spat dust and made to follow them, eager to find the source of their engagement and *deal with it*, but he caught himself two steps from the bottom.

Heart hammering, Soap looked up into the first floor again. “Come on, Ghost,” he whispered.

He waited.

The landing stayed empty.

“Come *on*.”

Another marine passed him, almost clipping him with the edge of his elbow. “-need to *leave*, mate,” the marine wheezed, staring at Soap as he passed, desperate confusion obvious in his voice.

Soap watched him go, his gut roiling. Seconds spun into lifetimes around his rising panic. He was out of time.

“Oh hell, Simon,” he whispered.

Then he turned on his heel and marched back up the stairs to the first floor.

Or, he intended to.

He only made it as far as the landing before a booming, painfully familiar sound ripped through the air.

A shockwave of sound and force hit him before the pain did, and then Soap was falling, the floor suddenly pulling away beneath him.

He was out, lost to the world, before he could feel himself hit the ground.

—

Soap came to with a dull ache at the back of his skull and Captain Price cursing in his ears.

“-how copy?” The sentence was bitten in half, the first part of it lost in hazy transmission feedback and the fog Soap was slowly pulling his brain out of.

Static roared in his ears, foamy waves of sound crashing against his scattered mind, obscuring the radio chatter.

“-solid. Made it... -neutralised.” It was Ghost’s voice this time, garbled by the transmitter, but it settled something in Soap’s chest into place that he hadn’t realised was missing all the same. Suddenly desperate, he tried to move.

“Christ,” he groaned. Blinking against harsh light and the crumbles of plaster that clung to his eyelashes, he only got as far as lifting his head. His vision swam for a moment before settling on a sea of rubble that surrounded him, large chunks of stone on top of him, pushing the air out of his lungs, numbing his muscles.

Lucky bastard, he thought to himself. *As usual*.

The static got louder again and Soap finally threw one clumsy hand towards his chest radio, having to wrench the fabric of his sleeve from underneath a pile of stones. He tried his best to tune properly into the correct frequency.

Price’s voice rang clear for the first time. “Sit-rep, Lieutenant?”

Soap held his breath.

“Compound’s secured. No hostiles left that I can see.”

Ghost sounded strung-out with exhaustion around his words. He hid it well, but Soap had become attuned to his voice— just one of many,

minor insights, the holes in Ghost's armour that revealed Simon beneath it all.

Either Price didn't pick up on Ghost's mood or he simply elected to ignore it, because he pressed on with a heady urgency. "No visual on Soap?"

There was a lengthy pause that sent lighting arcing through Soap's nerves, the realisation that he was a part of this re-solidifying in his mind.

"He's— he wasn't at extraction?"

Ghost's voice was so suddenly vulnerable, even over the comms, that Soap's stomach writhed. For a horrible moment, he was afraid that he'd be sick, some dreadful clashing of nerves, pain and the adrenaline that was slowly leaving his body souring his insides. Then, finally, his higher reasoning started to return to him. Blindly, he fumbled with the receiver of his radio with stiff, aching fingers.

"M'here," he coughed into the receiver, tasting ash at the back of his throat. "This is 7-1."

"Johnny."

That single word Ghost breathed into the comms held more weight to it than anything Soap had ever heard his lieutenant say. Thank god, it said. Thank god I didn't lose you.

The sound of it, that raw and open relief, reverberated through him, sinking deep into his bones in an irreversible kind of way. He'd never been laid claim to so blatantly before.

"Blimey, he fucking lives," Price said in his ear, pulling him back into reality. In spite of himself, Soap chuckled weakly at the disbelief in his tone, scrubbing a hand across his face.

"Aye, sir. Just cannae get rid'a me, eh?"

His tongue felt too heavy for his mouth, slurring the words he drudged up from someplace in the back of his mind. The thought of a possible concussion was slowly gnawing itself into Soap's thoughts, setting him more on edge than he'd like. If this was something he couldn't shake off in the next ten minutes he'd have bigger problems than the taste of dust between his teeth.

Gingerly, he tried to sit up. His muscles screamed at the movement, neither willing nor able to shift the rubble that pinned him. Absently, Soap wondered what he must look like beneath his gear— his skin was no doubt mottled with countless bruises that were currently making their presence painfully obvious to him.

Less absently, he thought about what might lie beneath the bruises, in the crushed recesses of his aching chest and stomach. A sickening visual of blood seeping into the spaces of his organs filled Soap's mind.

Keep your blood in, Ghost had said to him once. *You'll need every drop.*

He sure hoped that was enough for now, that by virtue of his blood staying internal, he'd be okay.

"Where are you?" Ghost barked, at the same time Price asked, "Soap, status report?"

The overlapping questions slid around with no purchase in Soap's hazy mind.

"Am- am no' too sure." He wasn't even sure which question he was answering.

"Are you broken?"

Price's tone was a metaphorical smack up the head. It was enough to bring some of his thoughts back into focus.

"No... no sir. Don't think so, anyway. Av' got a whopper headache, though."

Ghost's voice cut through the comms again, laced with a little more urgency than before. "Soap, *where the bloody hell are you?*"

Easy, Lt., Soap thought, but he didn't have the mental strength to voice it out loud. Instead, he blinked at the ruin of his surroundings. He was still surrounded by walls, so the building hadn't come down entirely, but if he craned his neck upwards he could see the gaping hole in the ceiling where the stairs had ripped though, pulling down a good chunk of the upper floor with it as they'd collapsed.

"Ground floor. Place where the stairwell used to be."

Another pause. Soap watched a trail of dust spill from the hole in the

ceiling.

“Jesus, Soap you’re still in the building?”

He tried to ignore the exasperation In Ghost’s voice.

“Am indeed.”

“Right,” came a slightly strangled reply.

“Soap, you need to move,” was Price’s order. “There’s a good chance that building’s gonna come down.”

The dust still leaked in thickening tendrils from the cracks in the ceiling.

“*Well aware*,” Soap said, testing the definition of insubordination with his tone. “Small problem, though.”

The comms stayed silent, dangerous anticipation filling the gaps between his sentences.

“I cannae move at the moment.”

“I thought you said you weren’t injured?” Price said, voice pivoting to match Ghost’s urgency.

Soap winced. “No, it’s not that— I...got caught in some rubble from the stairs. Has me pinned down.”

“Fucking hell Soap, lead with that next time. Bloody Christ.”

“Hoping there won’t be a next time, Captain.”

“Whatever keeps you going. Ghost, can you reach him?”

“Yes sir.” The reply was steely and instant.

“Don’t, Ghost—” Soap interjected. “I’ll.. figure something out. I can move.” Probably. “Just..need a mo’ to get some strength.”

He inhaled sharply as he tried to wrench his second arm free, feeling stones like sharp teeth tearing at the skin beneath his sleeve.

“Haven’t got a minute, Soap,” Price pointed out.

“I..” Soap faltered, weighing his options.

A tense sort of silence descended over the comms, and Soap was out of words. All he could hear was the rattling sound of his own winded lungs and, terrifyingly, periodic cracking sounds echoing throughout the vestiges of the building around him.

He busied himself trying to lift a chunk of stone with his right hand, fruitlessly trying to wiggle the left free without causing some kind of degloving injury in the process, and doing his damn best not to picture large stress fractures growing and crawling throughout the walls that surrounded him.

In the quiet of the moment, panic began to work its fingers around his throat again. Every second that slipped by seemed like an eternity wasted in this interlude to an inevitable disaster, and being crushed to death by a large section of timber and cinderblocks was not the way he'd ideally picture his end.

Soap tried to focus on his breathing. He'd been taught how to regulate his nervous system, two short, sharp inhales and a long exhale, and he tried it now, fighting the terrible sensation of his throat tightening. He was suddenly far too aware of how closed-in he was, like a rabbit caught in a snare.

More like caught between the jaws of a predator, the way the rubble was suffocating him.

"C'mon MacTavish, ye bastard," he grunted. "They're only scunnin' stones. Keep yer heid above water."

He wrenched his arm again and was rewarded with a gut-churning straining sensation in the socket of his shoulder, and no release.

Great, he thought. So my options are either to wait here and get crushed by the ceiling, or tear my arm clean off to escape.

At the very least, his head had cleared, the panic blowing away any cobwebs that his brief stint of unconsciousness had created in the crevices of his skull. A concussion was off the table, but now a new, deeper worry slid into its place as he surveyed the larger rubble that pinned him from the waist down.

An old conversation, rain-soaked and weightless, floated to the forefront of his thoughts.

“Parachute not opening?” He asked, hands folded behind his head.

“Nah. Not even likely. Unless you’re a bloody idiot.”

Soap cackled and slung one leg, then the other, over Ghost’s, casting a quick glance out of the window of their hideout.

“Ye never know. I think it’s a top contender.”

“You seriously want to go out that way?” Ghost asked. He didn’t stop disassembling his rifle as he spoke. “And have everyone know you’re the only cunt in the force who couldn’t find his reserve?”

“Mm. Maybe not.”

Ghost finished his disassembly and began methodically cleaning each piece of his weapon. Outside the dusty tenement window, the rain sloughed a nameless man’s blood from a kerb in their darkened corner of Vienna’s side-streets.

Soap hummed, turning several scenarios over in his mind, and watched Ghost work with a lightness in his chest. There was something endearing about the care he devoted to each piece, the quiet reverence with which he wiped away the sins that clung to the dark metal.

Ghost glanced up at him after a long while and held out his fist, a long piece of metal clutched in his palm.

Soap accepted the barrel he held between his fingers and peered through it with idle interest.

“Squeaky-clean, Lt.”

“You know it.”

He flipped the piece of metal into the air, catching it deftly and pointing it back at his partner. “Aw’right, how’s about this— stepping on a landmine.”

Ghost took the barrel back and replaced it, then held his hand out to Soap again, palm up this time. “Are your top ways to cark it exclusively idiotic?”

Soap handed his pistol over unquestioningly. “You mean heroic.”

“Don’t be a twat. Nothing heroic about it.”

“Oi! I’d be out with a bang, at the very least.”

Ghost shifted his position on the rickety bed, knocking the underside of Soap's knee with his own. He checked the magazine in the pistol he'd taken and gave it a cursory wipe down, then, satisfied, he returned it to Johnny's thigh holster.

"That's provided you actually go out," he said.

"Whatd'ye mean by that?" Johnny asked, adding a soft whisper of "ta," as Ghost secured the velcro strap of his holster.

"Just sayin'. I've seen lads do it. They get blown to pieces, legs shredded and all, and then— they don't die. What would you do after that?"

"Cripes," Soap muttered. He thought about that concept. He imagined his own limbs shattering beneath him, rendering him physically useless for the job and yet leaving him cruelly breathing, still with the same mind and desire to fight.

"Fuck knows. I don't think I could handle tha'," he said after a moment.

As if he could read his thoughts, Ghost laid one hand on Johnny's leg, working small circles into his knee —thankfully intact— with his gloved thumb.

"Yeah."

"I'm serious, Simon. I... God... if that ever happens, put me down. Swear it. Like a lame horse."

The grip on his knee tightened. "It won't."

"But if it did..."

"It won't."

The rain splashed against the window.

"Johnny?"

Ghost's voice rang out like a shot in an echo chamber. Relief, white-hot and volatile, flowed into Soap's veins.

"Over here, Lt.," he gasped, straining to see where the voice was coming from.

Ghost's dark outline moved into view in the ruined hallway, looming and dangerous. He looked every bit like his callsign suggested.

"Soap, you- *fucking hell*."

He had finally caught sight of him. Ordinarily, Soap would have cringed at how pathetic he must have looked in that moment, battered and half-submerged in timber and stone, but panic had left him vulnerable and all he could do was inhale sharply again, trying to steady himself.

Ghost ducked under a collapsed section of wall and moved to his side with quick footsteps, side-stepping what had once been the banister.

"You said no injuries?"

"I wasnae lying on comms, but--"

Ghost dropped to his knees by his side, surveying.

A sudden, strangling urgency overcame Soap.

"Ghost, I can't move... and I can't... feel very much."

Understanding smoothed the creases around Ghost's eyes. He stalled for a moment, one hand braced on his knee, the other frozen in the space between him and Soap.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Johnny." He said. His voice was low and reached for the pit in Soap's stomach, feeding that gnawing, irrational fear.

Turning his face away, Ghost reached for his radio.

"This is Bravo 0-7 to six."

"Ghost, update?" came Price's voice.

"Found Soap. Working on getting him out."

"Great. Any issues?"

Ghost looked at Soap at length, his eyes conveying something Johnny was too tired to understand.

"Negative."

“That’s what I like to hear. Johnny, how are you holding up?”

Soap groaned as Ghost’s hand found his left shoulder. He levelled his voice with gritted teeth.

“Still breathin’, Sir,”

“Should hope so. Try to get out quick, you two.”

Ghost’s fingers curled against the dip in Soap’s shoulder. With his other hand, he clicked the side button of his radio, severing the line of communication.

“Ghost, I-“

“Stop talking.”

Pressure bled into pain and Ghost leaned over him, wrenching his shoulder towards him and, at the same time, pushing against the wall of mound of stone that pinned his left side. Soap could do nothing but watch, heart caught in his throat, as Ghost worked wordlessly. He hissed as stone chewed skin and then, finally, the rubble shifted. Soap pulled his arm free with a desperate noise of relief.

“*Fuck* me. Thanks.” Blood rushed into his muscle again, sending waves of static coursing through his blood as Soap flexed his tender joints.

He tried sitting up again. It was a valiant attempt, and Soap almost managed to salvage some of the paper-thin shreds that were left of his dignity, but in the next moment a sharp, electrifying twinge in the nerves of his lower spine had him biting back another groan of pain. Ghost’s hands were there to catch him before his back hit the ground again, his grip just on the edge of painful. His voice was implacable as he spoke.

“Steady, Johnny.”

Soap could feel his heart writhing in his chest, the pain sending his pulse skittering all over the place. Pathetic, he thought. He hated this incapacitation, the way it left him totally vulnerable and reliant on Ghost. The very least he could do was sit upright, not flop around like a fish out of water while the man worked. Slowly, he propped himself up onto his elbows, bargaining with the muscles in his core. Ghost spared him no recovery time, one hand pulling viciously at his hips while the other braced a desperate kind of strength against concrete and rebar.

Something twinged suddenly in Soap's lower body, setting fire roaring through nerves, and a guttural noise of pain escaped his mouth before he could catch it.

Ghost froze.

"Fffuck. M'fine-" Johnny spat half a word out, hand flying to crush Ghost's wrist in his grip.

"Just.. gi'es a sec', yeah?"

The pain radiated in a halo from somewhere in his left hip, like a small, angry sun trapped in the socket between his bones. He took a deep, measured breath and closed his eyes. It was fine. He would make it fine.

"Christ." Ghost sat back on his heels and stared, raking a hand over the back of his head. "Fucking Christ."

"It's okay." It didn't sound very convincing, but he had neither the time nor the headspace to work on a more heartfelt acting performance.

"Ghost?" He tugged the man's wrist. "We need to git gaun, mate."

Ghost didn't move.

"Ghost, come on, please, I need your help."

There was a terrible cracking noise from the upper floor. The echo of it slithered down Soap's spine like freezing water.

"I don't want to hurt you."

Ghost's voice was terrifyingly small. Soap's lungs closed up around the sound, the air ripped from them like the space between them was a vacuum.

"Simon, c'mon. I trust you." He waited a moment before he continued, then added, "I don't wanna have to make you leave me."

Besides, a voice inside him said. I'll be in a lot more pain if the ceiling comes down.

That seemed to get through to Ghost, finally. He pulled Soap's hand away from his wrist and began to work again, shouldering himself against the weight of the rubble with abandon. His hand didn't return

to Johnny's hip, though— in fact, Ghost didn't so much as glance at him, just furrowed his brow and eyed the ground as he worked.

The pain lapped like waves against Johnny's consciousness, but he gritted his teeth and tried to ride through it. Every breath was a rasp between clenched teeth, every tiny, aching movement was a concession to his fading energy.

Time seemed to slow, ticking by in gasped breaths and grunts of pain half-quelled at their source.

Then Ghost slipped forward, rubble suddenly giving way to the pressure behind his movements, and Johnny was free.

Instantly, the lancing heat of pain washed away in a wave of dizzying euphoria. The sensation returned to his legs, along with a dull ache permeating the bones, but it didn't matter. He could flex the stiffness from his joints, and he could move. Soap breathed, thanked the long-dead version of God that existed in his mind, breathed again.

God damn lucky bastard.

Reeling with relief, Johnny tipped his head against Ghost's shoulder. "Thank Christ."

A hand brushed the back of his neck, barely there. The touch was real and grounding, but Ghost's voice was scarily faraway.

"Let's move."

—

If his life had been some kind of action movie, or maybe one of those recruitment films the SAS website liked to market to young hopefuls, the building might have started to fall just as Ghost pulled Soap to his feet. They might've ran through the crumbling hall, dodging pieces of falling stone with rehearsed, effortless precision, making it out the door in the nick of time. There might have been more gunfire, some witty one-liners, a little laughter.

As it stood, there was just the spine-chilling eeriness of an empty compound and Ghost pulling Soap's arm over his shoulder to steady him as they left the warehouse, which remained tentatively still intact. Soap protested the support, but with the pervasive ache inside him, it was half-hearted at best— consider his ego well and truly defunct.

The emptiness around them felt like a tangible thing, silence sticking to their skin. The wind was ice-cold, biting at Soap's face, and his words came out in a cloud of steam when he spoke.

"Well. That was fucked."

The sentence settled into the air without acknowledgement, Ghost choosing instead to simply shift Soap's weight around his shoulders and keep walking. It was sensible, Soap figured, to make a beeline away from the warehouse, but he still huffed at his lieutenant's silence.

They stopped at the compound's boundary, Soap peeling away from Ghost to lean against a half-crumbled perimeter wall. He flexed his foot, wincing at the pain that lanced through him from heel to hip.

Ghost looked at him for the first time since he'd been freed from the debris. "Solid?"

"Just about, aye."

Soap held his gaze for a long while, letting his mind fuzz with static again. He was suddenly aware of just how tired he was, the sensation of it weighing him down and making his body ache with a renewed ferocity.

Then, suddenly, he frowned. "Hang on a minute."

A thought burned into his mind that should have been there from the very beginning, had he not been more concerned with not being crushed beneath a tonne of stone.

Ghost arched a brow at him.

"You— how th' fuck did you get out of tha' building, earlier? You were behind me last I checked, and yet I was the only bastard left in the place when it blew. How'dye figure that one out?"

If he hadn't been so tired, Soap might not have imagined Ghost's mouth quirk beneath the mask.

"I was on the upper floor. Found an easy landing point to get to from the far window, made a quick decision. Wasn't hard to get down— meant I could pick off remaining hostiles, too."

Soap snorted. He wasn't in the habit of ego-measuring with his

partner, but he swore he could hear a tinge of smugness in Ghost's voice. "A'right, Batman. But why did ye—"

He was cut off by Ghost holding something out to him, answering the question before he'd finished asking it.

Between his thumb and forefinger, Ghost held a small grey flash drive.

Soap stared at him, mouth fully agape.

"Oh you bastard. You fucking bastard."

He couldn't believe it. It was so unlike Ghost. This was the sort of stunt Soap only ever expected himself to pull. He grinned then, all teeth and mischief, feeling an inexplicable rush of affection. He clapped Ghost on the back, the intangible feeling in his chest threatening to bubble over.

Ghost looked away, grumbling something inaudible, and tucked the flash drive back into one of the pockets of his tac vest. With the same hand, he clicked his radio back into action. Static buzzed in Soap's ear, and he listened to Ghost's voice filter through his earpiece. It sounded different to the real thing, stood in front of him, which was a sensation that warped his reality slightly.

"Bravo 0-7 reporting."

"Send traffic, Ghost." Price's request sounded like it required more energy to communicate than Soap had in him at that moment, so he leaned his head back against the lip of the wall and let Ghost take the wheel.

"We're out of the building. Currently situated at the north-west end of the compound."

"Good work, soldier. Status?"

"Solid." Ghost's eyes flicked over Soap's form. "MacTavish... well, he's upright."

Soap let a vague grumble escape his throat, but he didn't argue.

"Figures," Price said through the comms. "Well. Glad you're both still standing— but I've got more bad news for you. Look west."

Soap did as he was told, his eyes leaving Ghost's, scanning the peaks of the mountains and the iron-grey sky that lay beyond them.

“See that big bastard brewing?” Price asked. “Storm’s due to hit at about 2200 hours.”

It was true — the more Soap looked, the darker the clouds fringing the mountaintop seemed to become.

Beside him, Ghost checked his watch, then hissed quietly through his teeth.

“So that’s a no-go on extraction?” he interpreted.

“Fraid so, Lieutenant.”

There was a pause.

“*Shite*,” Soap supplied.

He exchanged a long look with Ghost, cataloguing the depths of exhaustion he could see beneath the mask— the way dark greasepaint had burrowed itself into the creases around Ghost’s red-rimmed eyes. He was sure that his own face wasn’t a much better sight, coated with plaster dust and grime and a thin layer of cold sweat that left him feeling a little less than human.

He leaned into his receiver without breaking eye contact. “So what’s tha’ mean for us, then?”

Price made a noncommittal noise. “Hang tight, Sergeant. We’re working on it.”

With that non-answer, the channel went dead.

Soap pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling the way his eyes stung when he squeezed them shut.

“Well. All-fuckin’-right then.”

“Could be worse.” Ghost shouldered his rifle, scanning the compound. “Could be dead.”

Soap huffed. “Ever the optimist.”

“You sore?”

“Get tae fuck. *Am I sore*, he asks, havin’ nearly skinned me ten minutes ago.”

“Hn,” was the depth and breadth of the reply he received.

Price crackled into existence in their heads again before they could dissolve into bickering.

“Well, lads. Seems your luck might not have completely run out after all.”

Soap huffed a laugh. “Care to explain? Could use a bitta good news right now, Sir.”

“I’m sure you could, Sergeant. There’s a defunct safehouse about seven clicks east of here. It probably won’t be the most welcoming place, and it’s not guaranteed to be secure, but it’s a roof over your heads and a ticket out of here. If you get a fire under your asses you can reach it before the storm. We’ll retry extraction from there by 0800 at the latest.”

Then, addendum, “hope you boys like hiking.”

—

It could hardly be called a *hike*. It seemed more like an extended, vertically oriented trial-by-fire to Johnny, one that left his teeth chattering and his hip screaming. Dull pain curdled into nausea in his stomach as he walked, each step sending a lance of fire through his lower body.

The stony silence that radiated from the man on his left didn’t help the feeling.

They’d made good progress, urgency and necessity manipulating their limbs without higher thought, the two of them trudging endlessly across frozen ground, and Soap had barely heard two words from Ghost’s mouth. Overhead, the slate-grey clouds loomed, promising an ominous future of harsh winter if they dared to lose pace.

Johnny was exhausted. They both were.

But Ghost’s silence was terrifying all the same.

It wasn’t entirely unusual. Soap had learned the limits of Ghost’s communication, testing the boundaries through a decent amount of trial and error that typically involved a lot of over-compensating from Soap’s end and a sharp “shut *up*” from Ghost’s.

He was used to that. He almost liked it.

But this felt different.

There was nothing he could do, though, just stumble onward by his side, craning his head to take in in snatches of Ghost's expression every time the pain was bearable enough for him to walk in step with him.

Close to two hours in, his hip buckled, having finally gathered the courage to protest against Johnny's determined stride. His stomach jolted at the sudden loss of stability and he lurched forward, steadying himself on Ghost's shoulder, barely managing not to hit the ground.

Ghost started, whipping his head around. His hand grabbed Johnny's elbow tight, locking him in place.

Beneath the mask, behind the greasepaint and the exhaustion, Ghost's eyes might as well have been solid stone.

"MacTavish."

Soap blew out a breath, neatly sidestepping any acknowledgment of his last name being used. He couldn't afford to get hung up on formalities, not here, leaden with exhaustion, clinging to the side of a mountain, trying to outrun a storm with a below-average number of working limbs.

"Sorry, L.t. Must'a slipped, or somethin'."

Ghost pinned him with his gaze. "You alright?"

"Yeah. 'Course."

Something dark and deep flitted across his gaze. "Sure?"

Soap nodded.

"Keep moving."

And the silence resumed.

The wind began to pick up, driving icy blades into any skin left exposed. Flurries of snow hazed out the landscape, leaving them lost in a world of grey-white uncertainty.

Soap hissed against the biting wind, drawing his neck gaiter over his

nose and mouth. Beside him, Ghost looked unchanged, his stride just as purposeful and uninterrupted as before.

Must be nice, he figured, to be wearing the right amount of layers for once.

By the time they reached the safehouse, cased the area (Ghost's doing), and jimmied the lock on the door (Soap's doing), Soap could barely feel the pain in his hip anymore, the cold replacing it with a tingling, all-over numbness.

It was a relief, to be out of the wind. Johnny wasted no time as the door shut behind them, fumbling with his plate carrier with numb fingers, dropping it unceremoniously into a dusty corner with his gear.

"Jesus, that feels good," he groaned, stretching his arms above his head, revelling in his sudden lightness.

Behind him, Ghost shifted. Johnny turned to watch him, taking in the space as he did so. It was sparse, sure, but there was something comforting about the cabin nonetheless. Maybe it was the threadbare sofa and the crumbling fireplace. Or maybe, it was the understanding that he and Ghost were completely alone here. A brief reprieve from real life, their very own space, hidden from the rest of the world.

Simon's chest was warm and still slick with sweat as Johnny laid his head down. Tremors wracked through his frame, the exhaustion of the aftermath still settling into his muscles.

They let the quietness swell for a long while, content to lie there in the darkness, listening to each other's breathing.

Johnny traced an idle pattern along the Simon's ribcage, feeling the way the bones turned to sharp ridges and deep valleys beneath scarred skin.

"Ever been up the mountains?"

Simon tipped his chin down to look at him.

"We spent the guts of a week in the Rockies last year, you daft bastard."

With his head resting on top of him, Johnny felt the way Simon's laugh rumbled through his lungs.

"Ah, you've been up mountains, aye. But The Mountains. Scotland's finest

highlands. The Munros there are one-of-a-kind, lad."

"Is that Gaelic for moron?"

Johnny jabbed a finger into Simon's side and snickered when the man jumped. Simon flicked the top of his head, then left his hand there, and Johnny felt fingers slowly begin to card through his hair, fingernails scraping softly against the bristled hairs of his shorn scalp.

"To answer your question, no. Never been further north than Carlisle."

"I find tha' offensive. And hard ta believe, actually."

"What can I say? Born and bred in the queen's country."

Johnny made audible noise of disgust. "Gonnae pretend you didn't say that."

Another chuckle shook Simon's chest, the noise of it seeping into Johnny's skull.

"Well," Johnny continued. "We'll hafta change tha' fact. The highlands... they really are somethin' special."

He rolled over onto his stomach, propping himself up on an elbow to look at Simon. He was still getting used to this. The mask coming off in the heat of the moment wasn't new. He'd almost grown used to the luxury of Simon's mouth against his, the feeling of hot, open kisses trailing down his stomach, the whisper of a half-choked breath on his back, raising the hairs at the nape of his neck. But it staying off afterwards— that was new. It felt a little like a confession in its own right, one that they were both still far too afraid to voice out loud.

He wondered how many times he would have to see Simon's face for him to stop frantically trying to memorise it, to make it permanent in his mind.

Maybe he never would.

Simon watched him now, his brown eyes somehow, impossibly, softer in the dark.

"When my service is up," Johnny confessed, "If I don't pop my clogs, I'd like ta live there. Up in the highlands."

The smallest, quietest smile played on Simon's lips. "I can see that. Holed up in a little cabin. You and all your notebooks."

“Mm, yeah.”

There was a beat. Simon’s hand stopped running across his scalp, and moved down to trace the corner of his jaw instead.

“Sounds nice,” he whispered.

With way his reasoning was clouded by the sensation of Simon’s body against his— sticky skin surrounding him, all their scars shrouded in darkness— Johnny could have sworn his tone was almost wistful.

The warmth of the memory bloomed in Johnny’s chest, making the biting chill in the safehouse all the more stark.

He stole another glance at Ghost. He was still quiet, Johnny noted, the acknowledgment sending a wave of unease rippling through his stomach.

Johnny moved to the centre of the room, standing in front of the hearth, and kicked one of the charred logs that had spilled over the lip of the fireplace. It left a smear of charcoal dust on the threadbare rug.

“D’ye reckon we could light a fire?”

“No.”

The answer was clipped.

“We’re in the middle of a fuckin’ snowstorm, mate, I think—“

“No. Use your fuckin’ head, Johnny. We’ve been caught unawares one too many bloody times already. Do you really wanna give them a beacon to find us here, cozied up and completely fucking useless?”

Ghost’s voice was like sheets of frozen steel scraping together, a combination of weariness and something that sounded an awful lot like fear constricting the sound.

“A’wright, *Jesus*. What’s up yer arse all of a sudden?”

Ghost crossed the room and glanced out of the window, tension drawing his shoulders tight.

Then, after a moment, he looked back. Johnny watched his eyes flare, something long-buried working its way to the surface of his expression.

“That...was a fucking disaster back there. Running around like a bunch of twats, completely in the blind. You— you almost *died*, Johnny.”

The air in the room seemed to thicken. Ghost continued.

“We can’t afford to piss around here, we just need to lay low and then get the fuck away from here.”

“Simon, come on—”

“Don’t you— don’t.”

They both broke off. Outside, the wind howled into a crescendo, rattling the thin glass panes of the window.

“Let’s no’ fight,” Johnny said quietly.

Ghost cast his gaze upward, then looked at him. His expression was devastating, clawing right into the pit of Johnny’s stomach.

“Yeah,” he conceded, then turned to the window.

God, what a pair they were, Johnny thought as they stood there. Rooted to the floor, each equally unwilling to be the first to break.

He watched Ghost’s back, the way his shoulders moved with every inhale, backlit gently by the washed-out grey of the stormy sky outside.

After a long while, long enough for Ghost to release a long, weighted exhale, Johnny crossed the floor to stand by his shoulder.

“C’mon,” he whispered against Ghost’s neck.

Wordlessly, Johnny began working the straps of his plate carrier loose. Ghost’s shoulders sagged when he found the quick-release and he let out a low hum that worked its way directly into Johnny’s mind.

The velcro straps around his midriff came away with a noise of scratchy protestation, and Soap shifted to catch the weight of the vest in his arms. It weighed a *ton*, still loaded with weapons, stims and whatever other paraphernalia Ghost insisted on carrying around with him. Johnny had teased him about it before, insisting he start bringing a couple of duffle bags, or perhaps a sizeable purse, with him into battle.

That line of jabs had been quickly shut down the more Johnny realised how useful it actually was to have a sort of...cart-horse as a partner on missions. Sometimes all it took was an extra mag thrust into his palm in the heat of a firefight to make Johnny's heart swell and burst, just to know that Simon was there.

Ghost's outer layers were next.

"Bleedin' Jesus," Johnny murmured, pulling layers of shrouding fabric from around Ghost's shoulders. "Always with the bloody cape, ya fuckin' drama queen."

Ghost huffed a laugh, barely audible beneath the mask, and Johnny felt his heart glow.

"Bet it doesnae even keep ye warm, just adds to the look, eh?"

"Shut it," Ghost grumbled, but the bite was gone from his voice. He sounded tentative instead, the closest thing to open fondness he would allow himself.

Johnny smiled when Ghost turned to face him again, folding his cloak into a rough ball and leaving it with his plates.

He watched the corners of Ghost's eyes crinkle almost imperceptibly. With slow hands, he moved to lift the seam of the mask that hid the rest of that rare smile, feeling the fluttering pulse underneath the skin of his neck.

Ghost closed his eyes, and the mask pulled away.

"There you are."

It was pure adoration, whispered into the spaces between breaths.

"Welcome back, Simon."

Roughened hands took the mask from between his fingers. "Never left."

Just like every time, Johnny catalogued his features in his mind, as if the map of scars that littered Simon's skin were liable to get up and run away if he didn't hold them in place in his memory. With his thumb, he brushed away a smear of plaster dust that clung to Simon's cheek.

"C'mon, gràidh. What's got you thinkin'?" Johnny asked, voice low.

Finally broaching the low, quiet fear that he felt beneath Simon's skin, in the long stretches of silence he'd been hiding behind.

Simon was quiet for a long moment, eyes searching Johnny's features for something inexplicable. Johnny almost accepted that he wasn't going to get an answer, that this was one of those many gaps in their conversations that neither of them seemed to be able to fill, before Simon spoke again.

"You disobeyed my order earlier."

Johnny blinked. "What'dye mean?"

"I gave you a direct order to leave, and you stayed."

If Simon's voice had been anything other than a gravelled whisper, Johnny might have been inclined to argue. Even so, a pinch of indignation made his nose wrinkle. "I was leaving, you numpty. It was you who stayed put, I checked behind me and you *weren't there*."

"Alright, so I wasn't there. Why'd you stop moving?"

Johnny watched him. The answer leapt into his throat far too easily.

"Because I was worried about you."

The silence strained with words buried beneath words. He could have pulled one of Simon's knives from their sheath and eviscerated himself there and then, let his still-beating heart fall from between his ribs and stain the floorboards with red; it would have been to the same end.

Here, his tattered confession said. Take whatever's left inside of me. It's all yours anyway, however bloody it might be.

Simon's inhale was jagged around the edges.

"If we weren't-" he broke off too quickly, raking a hand through his hair as the rest of the sentence dried in his mouth. "If you didn't care who I was, you wouldn't have looked back, and we wouldn't be in the shit right now."

Johnny regarded him, the beginnings of wariness creeping up his spine. "But I did. I do care. So what's your meaning?"

There was a beat of silence. Johnny stepped back as Simon crossed to the moth-eaten sofa, sitting down gingerly. He rested his forearms on

his thighs, looking down at the hood in his hands.

“Fuck, I don’t know,” he sighed. “It’s just...every day, I question if we’re total nutcases. If it would be better to break this off before it gets us both topped. But then I see you, and... it’s like nothing makes sense except us. As if I’d be mad to be anywhere but with you.”

He twisted the mask between his hands.

“And that scares me, Johnny. You scare me. You make it so fuckin’ easy to care.”

Oh.

They didn’t say things like this. They never had the time, or the courage, to draw lines in the sand. Johnny didn’t know what to do with this sudden honesty, an open and uncharted space between them. It felt like the cord on his chute had been cut, and suddenly he was untethered, unreachable, and utterly, utterly fucked.

He had always been an animal starved of praise.

Something primal within him, that had been dormant for his entire life, reared its head, and he felt the sudden weight of understanding for the first time. It was a dizzying sensation.

“C’mere,” Simon whispered.

Johnny moved, was already moving before the end of his word. He crossed the floor and came to stand in front of Simon’s hunched form, nudging the edge of his boots with his own. Scared to speak, in case he tipped the balance of their weighted silence.

Without looking up, Simon shifted, giving him room to stand between his legs. Like it was something they’d practiced. Like it was something Johnny didn’t need to ask to be offered.

He’d never understand what it was that made them tick. What complicated mechanism the two of them had to work around, the way they danced tentative circles around one another in one moment, only to collide with magnetised force in the next. He didn’t care. All he knew was the warmth of Simon’s hands, solid and tangible, the way they moved to steady him at his waist.

Johnny breathed out a tuneless, tiny noise, feeling his skin shiver against the touch, and Simon finally looked at him again.

They watched each other for what felt like an eternity.

“God,” Simon breathed after a long while. “What the hell have we gotten ourselves into?”

In lieu of a response, Johnny traced the line of Simon’s jaw, feeling the knotted flesh of scar tissue beneath his fingers.

“I was proper spooked, earlier. I swear it, Johnny. When I couldn’t...I thought-“

“Yeah,” Johnny whispered, smothering the end of Simon’s broken sentence. “I know.”

Simon closed his eyes against Johnny’s touch.

A familiar thought clawed its way up his oesophagus.

I’m going to lose him, someday.

It was an old friend, that worry. That feeling of a knife resting against his ribcage, poised perfectly to strike.

I’m going to lose him and there is nothing I can do about it.

He wasn’t in the habit of praying, not anymore. It was an instinct that had been beaten out of him the minute his first ever body had hit the ground.

But still...

In the silence of their empty hideaway, Johnny leaned down to kiss Simon with a desperate, selfish prayer on his lips.

Please.

Let me die first.

Minutes stretched out, long and quiet and bleeding into one another. Simon’s mouth was warm, his lips rough and cracking when they parted for Johnny’s.

Johnny pulled away when he felt Simon’s hands creep down his waist. Fingers slid beneath the hem of his shirt, pulling the fabric up over his navel.

Johnny raised his eyebrows, hands still cupping Simon’s face. “Try’na

undress me while we're on duty, Sir?"

Simon didn't play along, his face creased with a determined focus, something on the cusp of worry drawing the corners of his eyes tight.

"Have to make sure.." he whispered.

He exposed the expanse of Johnny's left hip with a sweep of his hand, one thumb hooked beneath his waistband, the other hiking his shirt up high. The frigid air was a shock to Johnny's system, laving ice over his mottled skin.

Sure enough, an angry bruise spilled across his side, tendrils of purple radiating from his hipbone, flecked with red bite marks where tough stone had broken through the wine-stained skin.

Simon drew a sharp breath. "You said you were fine."

"I am fine."

"Johnny.. this could've been *bad*."

So could everything, Johnny thought. So could every damn thing about them.

Simon's voice wavered. "This— why... were you being such a fucking twat about it? If you're injured, you need to be *honest*."

Johnny considered for a moment. He could have said a thousand different things, and any one of them could have been the right answer. His incessant need to complete his duty. Fear of incompetence. Fear, full stop.

"Cause it wasn't over," he settled with. "We needed to get away, Price gave us an out. I wasnae gonna be the reason we didn't take it. 'Sides — I'm okay, amn't I?"

Simon's hands tightened around him, just on the edge of painful. "You fucking tosser."

Johnny sighed. "My number isn't up jus' yet, Simon."

As the words left his lips, he tried his hardest to make sure he believed them. He'd keep pushing back the inevitable until his life eventually gave out inside him. He'd fight tooth and nail against loss until it consumed him whole. He wasn't going to be dead until the moment he hit the ground. He wasn't going to stop reaching for Simon until his

hands were torn clean off.

“Idiot..” Simon mumbled. “You need to be careful.”

Then, so quiet that Johnny almost believed he hadn’t said anything at all. “...’cause I need you to stick around, yeah?”

He ghosted a kiss over Johnny’s hipbone with the words.

Johnny’s spine melted at the softness of it.

This... this was becoming dangerous. It was right there in front of him, encapsulated in that one single word. The *need* of it. Their terrible symbiosis.

They were sewn together by breakable thread. Surgeon’s sutures, harsh knots over bloody wounds, not made to last, just willing to hold them together long enough to keep their blood in. They’d learned to avoid sharp objects, their conversations carefully side-stepping the knife-edges of words that threatened to sever each stitch.

Outside, the wind howled. Pain still raked sharp claws through his bones. Fear permanently gnawed at the base of his skull.

But Simon’s hands held him together. His lips traced a long-dead scar beneath his ribcage, warm breath sending goosebumps skittering across Johnny’s flesh, eyes trained on him, on his movements.

And in the end, it didn’t matter, knowing that it would all end someday. He’d come to grips with that reality the day he’d signed his life away in that dingy recruitment centre on Charlotte Street, all of seventeen, his first time in Glasgow city centre alone, a young teenager with an awkward haircut and eyes on the horizon.

Because it wasn’t in the ending, or the pre-emptive grief that soaked through him when he looked into Simon’s eyes. It was in the knowing, the having. It was holding a flame between his hands and clamping down until the embers burned away into emptiness. He hoped it would leave his palms scarred forever, a reminder of the hurt and the healing and everything in between.

The windowpanes rattled. Darkness slipped slowly over the mountains, and the snow fell.

Lips met skin in the half-light, hands found purchase in warmth, more gentle prayers were spilled over exposed skin.

It was enough. It would be enough.

They'd stave off the ending together.

End Notes

making oblique references to my current favourite fic... ya know...?

This fic has been kinda mouldering away in my drafts for a while now, and yesterday i finally got the urge to finish it (despite the fact that i have an insane amount of uni work to catch up on) so here, take this little vignette of their relationship, the way it feels to me. These two have worked their way right into my heart, with all of their mess, their unspoken promises, their inherent, inevitable spiral towards tragedy. Love them so much.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!